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By MICHELLE GANASSI, Daily American

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The House Democratic health care reform bill was a hot topic during a telephone town hall meeting Thursday morning.

Seniors from 10,912 homes in the 12th Congressional District received telephone calls from U.S. Rep John Murtha during his fifth telephone town hall meeting. In Somerset County, 2,208 people received the telephone calls. Both Democrats and Republicans were included.

Using tax money for abortions, covering holes in prescription medication plans and keeping insurance rates down were among topics the 24 people who asked Murtha a question inquired about.

"The health care system in the U.S., if you have the money, is one of the best in the world," Murtha, D-Johnstown, told the listeners.

Before he started fielding questions, Murtha said the plan, which is expected to go to a vote in the House within the next few days, will eliminate preventive care co-pays to encourage people to see a physician before they have a disease or emergency.

"Some people tell me their experience in the emergency room is not very favorable," he said.

Several people asked whether tax money would be used to pay for abortions, a misconception Murtha quickly addressed.

"Abortion will not be paid for by the taxpayers," he said. "Nobody is more pro-life than I am. When I handled military medicine, I didn't let them do abortions overseas. I am against it and I feel we have protected the taxpayers."

Several residents had questions about how Medicare would be affected. Murtha, a Medicare user, said he knows how good the program is.

"I dropped Blue Cross and found Medicare good for me now," he said.

He said the bill will enhance the Medicare program and help close the gap in prescription drug coverage.

Coverage for illegal aliens was also discussed. Murtha said the problem is some illegal immigrants provide false Social Security numbers, driver's license and other identification to businesses for employment.

"The business has no way of knowing that," he said. "Right now the bill prohibits illegal immigrants (from receiving taxpayer subsidized health care). Whoever said we are going to fund them is wrong."

A computer system through which small businesses can check to see if identification is valid is being discussed, Murtha said.

A woman from Westmoreland County asked about expanding Medicare to people in their 50s. She said she lost her job and is having trouble finding work.

"We hope with credits and so forth we will be able to take care of that," Murtha said.

The congressman said the plan should help small businesses provide coverage at a lower cost to their employees. Competition from the government plan may also drive the cost of private plans down.

“Thousands of people don’t have care,” Murtha said. “Thousands went bankrupt with medical costs. We want to make sure the bill takes care of those people. That’s why it is taking so long. We need to get this right.”

People will be able to keep their private, Medicare and TRICARE plans if the legislation is passed, he added.

“I can assure you we will have a health care bill we can be proud of,” he said.

But not all the questions were about health care. A Johnstown man commented about the jobs Murtha brings to the area through “pork-barrel spending.”

“We can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done,” he said.

Murtha said his critics won’t keep him from doing his job, making sure his district gets its fair share of federal money. “They don’t discourage me,” he said.

A Somerset County man asked about finishing four-lane Route 219 to the Maryland border.

“I don’t represent that area anymore but I told (U.S. Rep Bill) Shuster I will do anything I can,” he said. “219 is absolutely essential to our area.”

Murtha said he fought to place more money for infrastructure projects in the stimulus plan.

“You can be assured I am for 219 and trying to make sure we have jobs in the district,” he said.

The conference call lasted one hour.